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ABSTRACT

The learning styles and strategies of Arab students in intensive language programs in the United States are discussed. Theory on the role of culture in learning and in the development of cognitive style is reviewed. Related aspects of Arab culture are examined, including the roles of oral and written language use, child-rearing, student behavior, and the importance of respect in the classroom. Characteristics of classroom instruction and attitudes toward achievement in the Middle East are described. It is concluded that English-as-a-Second-Language teachers must recognize and respect the cultural differences of Arab students, and meet these differences in a constructive manner. (MSE)

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Learning Styles of Arab Students in EFL Classrooms

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In intensive English programs in North America the teacher finds herself, more often than not, in a multi-cultural classroom. She observes that students from different language groups perform differently in class, on tests, and in social contexts. This paper will look at Arab students in particular and how they tend to learn. It will also look at some possible explanations of why they would tend to have certain strategies for learning, with some suggestions for implementing some ways of teaching to these strategies.

First of all, by "Arab", I am speaking of students from the Middle East who have been raised monolingually, with English introduced in junior or high school, or possibly not until the person leaves his or her country. This means that students from North Africa, for example, are not completely included in these considerations, because they have usually already acquired a second language.

Learning Styles and Cognitive Styles

Brislin (1981) defines learning styles as "the various ways people acquire new information and attitudes, and the effects of the context in which the learning takes place" (128). This is certainly the situation in which our students find themselves. Part of this is related to cognitive style, which is somewhat individualistic but very much affected by culture.

One of the earliest of the major contributors to research on cognitive styles was Herman A. Witkin (1978, 1981). He, among others, introduced the idea of field dependent and field independent cognitive styles. A field dependent individual tends to use the environment, including social cues from people, to make decisions. On the other hand, a field independent person relies more on internal referents, and structures situations on his or her own. This person tends to have a degree of autonomy in interpersonal relations (Witkin, 1978).

Cognitive styles tend to be stable across domains and over time, and are "pervasive dimensions of individual functioning" (Witkin, 1978). However, they are also value-neutral; Witkin points out that "whether a given cognitive style is 'good' or 'bad' depends on its adaptive value in a particular situation . . . For cognitive styles, value is relative to context" (Witkin & Goodenough, 1978, 29). Witkin cautions that field dependence/independence is value free and that cognitive style is not Western or non-Western, Eastern or non-Eastern. However, value is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak, and some attributes of one style may be viewed more positively or negatively in one society as opposed to another (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981). It must be pointed out, however, cognitive styles are not necessarily unchangeable. There is some evidence that specially designed educational efforts may influence some components of cognitive styles (Witkin, 1978).

Finally, these styles may be reflected in varying degrees within an individual; in other words, some people are strongly oriented one way or another, while others may show a mixture of styles (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981).

Witkin makes it very clear that cognitive style and culture are inextricably related. In particular, he discusses the effects of different child rearing practices in various cultures. He refers to "tight" (conforming) versus "loose" (non-conforming) societies.

Child-rearing naturally reflects these aspects, and since cognitive style is established early in life, surely one's upbringing would affect it. For example, strict parents tend to raise more field dependent children who conform to the society around them; on the other hand, field independent children are raised by less strict parents who teach their children to rely on themselves.

Arab Culture

Since we are considering Arab students, then, let us look at a few aspects of Arab culture that may be connected with how Middle Eastern students learn. First of all, Arab culture seems to be what Witkin would call a "tight" society. It demands much conformity from its members, particularly through Islam, which dominates daily and spiritual life. The "rules of life" are clearly laid out in the Koran and are generally adhered to by Muslims. Even non Muslim Arabs are influenced by Islam, even though they do not embrace that religion. However, there are other facets of Arabic culture that may be considered here.

It has been said that "Arabs are in love with language" (Parker, 1986). Certainly the Arab language is connected with Islam. In actuality there are two kinds of Arabic, literary and colloquial. Literary Arabic is fairly comprehensible to all, even illiterate Arabs, through its use in the Koran, but at the same time, some areas are considered as having the "best" dialect. In general, though, Arab people feel that Arabic is a blessed language because it was the "vehicle of [God's] ultimate revelations to the world" (Ferguson, 1977). This sense of superiority can be severely tested when the individual is learning a new language.

Arabs are prone to exaggeration and eloquence. Emphatic assertion is an integral part of Arabic, with much ready-made phraseology sprinkled liberally throughout the language. There is also a tendency for verb tense to drift (by English standards), which may be connected with somewhat of an unconcern with time. Often the past is marked by events, rather than tense. Parker (1986) notes that for Middle Eastern students, words carry a weight and importance of their own. There is sometimes a confusion between word and reality, with the result that sometimes the future is expressed with intention but not with action (Patai, 1983).

In general, Arab societies are more "orate" than literate. There is still an emphasis on spoken language, with poetry and oral eloquence being particularly prized. Until recently, traditions for many professions were passed down orally, without the benefit of book learning (Vaczek & Buckland, 1981).

An orate society is different from a literate society in many ways. Kaplan sums up a few of these:

> These differences have to do with attitudes toward fact and truth, with the existence of science and coincidentally of scientific method. These differences also have to do with the existence of commentary on form as well as content, with the bridging of time and space, with the ease of dissemination, and with actual changes in the structure of language resulting from these capabilities (Kaplan, 1986, 11).

Literacy, in other words, can be seen as the destabilization of an orate society, with more dependence on written language, and possibly even a different rhetorical style (Kaplan, 1986). Many of the Middle Eastern countries have become widely literate only in this century, and so we might surmise that they are in the throes of some of these changes.

Patai (1983) covers many aspects of Arab culture, including child-rearing practices, in his book The Arab Mind. He tells us that the average Arab family is rather large, with an authoritarian father and a loving and compassionate mother. Paternalism rules, and "the children learn to subordinate their own personal interests to those of the family as represented by the father or grandfather" (27). One study he reported on indicated that in a comparison of three ethnic groups in Lebanon, the Sunni Muslim group was the least likely to reward good behaviour, often used threats, and was least likely to reward independent behaviour. This seems to result in less achievement in the economic and possibly the educational spheres (Patai, 1983).

There are certain broad traits within Arab culture which may affect an individual student's attitudes or behaviour in a classroom. One of these is the matter of respect. How others treat him is important, especially in how it shows their respect toward him. "Face" is extremely important, a consideration that is connected with shame. Patai tells us that "the fear of shame represents such as ever-present psychological pressure, his response often takes the form of merely outward conformity with ethical demands whose substance is largely neglected" (1983, 107). This may be seen in the classroom in various forms, including flattery, bravura, or cheating. For this reason, criticism is a ticklish area for many Arab students. The student must come to recognize that the information is separate from the person who transmits it, and that there is a difference between collective opinions and "detached disagreement" (i.e. that disagreement with an idea is not necessarily a personal attack) (Osterloh, 1986) Brislin (1981) points out that in the Middle East, friends don't criticize where others can hear, even in a seminar. He suggests approaching this by preparing the student by telling a story, having him read an essay, or using a cultural assimilator.

Education in the Middle East

If family helps determine cognitive styles, surely education must help determine learning styles, or at least learning strategies. Education is an element of cultural maintenance as well as change. At this point, the educational system in Arab countries tends to be paternalistic and authoritative. For an individual, academic choices may actually be determined more by the father than by the student (Parker, 1986). In the past, education consisted of "commonsense wisdom," including religious values, traditional laws, common stories, and the glory of the past. These were often passed down in an oral tradition. The system now tends to emphasize imitation and memorization rather than the learning of research skills and the ability to develop solutions. Teachers stay with specific innovations but do not usually test hypotheses (Rabie, 1979). In addition, education in Arab countries often places the onus on quantitative growth rather than qualitative, on numbers over standards. There is also an emphasis on economic, technological, and practical subjects rather than on cultural and humanistic areas [of course]. This can be seen in the majors chosen by students who are supported by scholarships abroad (Zurayk, 1979).

The teaching of English in Saudi Arabia can be taken as a case in point. The

curriculum and timetable are strictly set by the Ministry of Education; as a result, many students often feel that most of the teachers are concerned more with finishing their assigned responsibilities within the time allowed, whether learning is achieved or not, and that passing the final exam is more important than learning the language (Altwaijri, 1982). Furthermore, often teachers are not trained in TEFL while at the same time possibly being in the position of having to develop materials that are acceptable for content (Byrd, 1987).

Arab Students in North American Education Systems

What happens to Arab students when they come to North America to study? Mostly they have to adapt academically to a critical/analytical style of education. What they attempt to do is to apply strategies acquired in the educational and cultural contexts at home to a new situation. More often than not, these strategies fail to work effectively.

Reid (1987) presented the results of some research on learning style preferences of non-native students in North America. In general, ESL students preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, with a negative preference for group learning. Arabs were strong visual as well as auditory learners. Reid suggests that the latter is probably because the Arab sound system closely parallels English (in comparison to Oriental languages, for example). However, as we have discussed here, it may also be a preferred cultural style. Arab speakers identified group learning as a minor, rather than a negative learning style, in contrast to most other language groups, who identified it as negative. Of the learning styles that Reid looked at, the Arab students rated them in this order: kinesthetic, tactile, auditory, individual, visual, and group.

Some of these preferences were supported by the findings of a questionnaire circulated by a masters student at the American Englsih Institute at the University of Oregon. The students preferred a more traditional approach to language instruction, with a negative preference for programmed text, and group and pair work. They preferred a teacher-centered approach, but did express a secondary preference for student-centred activities (Chinn, 1987). Chinn concluded that learners varied in preference regarding learning styles, learners with instrumental linguistic goals preferred a more traditional approach, and learners who favored their language instructor tended to view their competence in academic and functional skills as good.

One area that many Arab students have difficulty with is reading. Regarding this, one must consider that there is an idea of the sanctity of the text, with the Koran being the prime example. It is not to be disputed, criticized, or contested. Furthermore, in literary Arabic, verbal elements are stressed more or less equally, and "everything written is perceived primarily as a linear presentation rather than as a composition within a logical order" (Osterloh, 1986). In fact, paragraphing in Arabic is a relatively recent phenomenon (Kharma, 1986).

Typically, an Arab student does not survey a text to determine whether it is worth reading, he does not distinguish between important and unimportant information, and he generally finds it difficult to write something based on a text. Often he does not know how to deal with the language of a text. Consequently it is important for him to be taught underlining, notetaking, and summarizing (Osterloh, 1986). In general, he needs to develop new, more effective reading skills that also encourage critical and analytical reading and thinking.

Regarding vocabulary, it is useful to have students practice a variety of ways of

approaching learning and using new words. Looking at word families, working with stems and suffixes (very common in Arabic), and manipulating words in word games, such as crosswords puzzles, all offer different ways of seeing words. These can appeal to visual and even kinesthetic learning preferences.

A contributing factor to reading and cognitive style related to Arabs involves eye movement. In experiments in oculomotricity, eye movements during certain tasks depend in certain ways on cognitive components of information processing. Witruk (1982) writes that

> Poor potentials for coping with specific demands are associated with the maintenance of inefficient strategies of assimilating information. We think that this is evidence of the cognitive control of information intake, and that the analysis of individual strategies of coping with tasks through recording eye movements is a promising research approach (186).

This would be especially useful in helping to train previously monolingual Arabs who may have problems with directionality in reading. Levy-Schoen (1982) connects eye movements for visual tasks as being integrated with other regulatory processes, such as body movements and social communication. This, once again, may be connected to cultural learning styles.

Arab Learning Styles and the EFL Teacher

For the EFL teacher in North America, particularly one without overseas experience, there is often the danger of ethnocentrism in thinking about learning. There may be some cultural prejudices (Farquharson, 1987) and there may also be some broad assumptions about certain classroom performances. Farhady (1979) notes that there is an imbalance of abilities among various national and language groups, and suggests that this may be attributed to their previous education, in which certain skills may have received more emphasis than others. This imbalance may be reflected in testing, where, for example, certain skills may be included which have not actually been taught (such as inferencing, guessing vocabulary from context, etc.).

One example of a testing procedure where learning style could be a contributing factor to success (or lack of), is cloze testing. It has been suggested that field dependence or independence factors may affect cloze solutions and so the problem-solving aspects of cloze tests may be an indication more of field dependence or independence than of second language acquisition (Hansen, 1984). Field dependent persons tend to be less able to correctly complete cloze tests, which affects cultural groups such as Middle-Easterners.

O'Malley et al (1985) have researched the development of learning stategies with ESL students. These can be divided into metacognitive strategies (those which relate to knowing how one learns and how to use that knowledge) and cognitive strategies (those which are specific to distinct learning activities). Both of these should be combined for most effectiveness (See Table 1).

O'Malley et al (1985) indicated that students' own observations of their learning strategies was difficult to measure and was often not observable, but they gave Rubin's (1981) classification of learning strategies regarding direct manipulations of the learning

materials. These could be useful for classroom activities (see Table 2).

On a broader level, O'Malley et al suggest the development of learning materials that expand the students' repertoire while making them critical of the language learning activities that they use (1985). More knowledge on a theoretical and practical level would make these materials more possible to develop--and then of course they would need to be responsive to the variety of metacognitive and cognitive strategies of various cultural groups, as well as of various individuals.

Teachers can help their students by motivating them to identify their learning styles and to help them develop those existing ones more fully while developing new ones. Reid (1987) suggests that teachers could help their students sample unfamiliar teaching and learning styles. Certainly they are likely to sample many new teaching styles, depending on the student's academic major--one would expect that science and social science, for example, might involve different styles. Information about learning styles and strategies could come in many forms and certainly could lead to valuable insights for the students, as well as the teacher.

Teachers who want to respond to particular learning styles would obviously have to vary their teaching methods. Having a homogeneous group of students would simplify matters, but this is not likely to happen in North America. Particularly for new students, there should be a mixture of approaches to teaching, ranging from a sprinkling of rote memorization to the development of more critical and analytic skills. The former are familiar to the students, while the latter are necessary for success in a North American educational environment. Along with this should go variations in testing, as Farhady (1979) would remind us.

Awareness of learning styles and strategies is a strategy in itself, for both the teacher and the student. Sometimes students are not aware that they do have a particular style and a repertoire of strategies to deal with new information. Even if they are, sometimes they think the teacher would not "approve" of how they go about learning, especially in view of that fact that in many North American classrooms, "new" skills, such as predicting, vocabulary from context, etc., are introduced. The student can develop his or her own most effective ways to deal with new information (brainstorming, memorizing, use of visual or mnemonic cues, etc.), if the old ways don't work. Some class discussion related to this could be most helpful in alleviating anxiety or frustration and in pointing out that if something works, they should use it.

Porte (1988) stresses the importance for teachers to<u>not</u> "carry through our own methodologies <u>in spite of</u> the learners' own strategies for handling a particular activity." He also emphasizes that the students, with the help of the teachers, should identify, develop, and refine their repertoire of learning strategies. Pearson (1988) also says this, suggesting that learning training, including cross-cultural training, coping with culture shock and stereotyping, should be presented along with language training.

<u>Future Directions</u>

Learning styles and culture are connected in ways that have not yet been explored fully. O'Malley, Chamot, et al (1985) stress the need for more research in learning strategies for second language learners, with special types of strategies for specific students to be considered. This could be accomplished in a variety of ways: interviews, controlled testing, and ethnographic studies (see Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

More specific studies involving Arab students and their learning styles would be very

productive in facilitating materials and curriculum development. A comparative study between Arab students in their own countries versus Arab learners in North American or other English contexts could be very useful as well.

It would also be interesting and fruitful to compare information about learning styles among other cultural groups such as various Oriental or European language groups. Some of these may dovetail and others may conflict. Certainly more knowledge about these would help the teacher in a multicultural class.

Finally, more information regarding how cognitive style and cultural background affects language learning would be very helpful. d'Angeljan and Renaud (1985) found that cognitive style is a significant variable in students' membership in good learner or poor learner groups. This should be explored further.

Conclusion

Learning styles are only one aspect of the learning process, and culture is only one aspect, albeit a major one, of the determinants of those styles. However, in the case of Arab students, one can see some connections between the "tightness" of Arab culture, the corresponding "tightness" of the Arab education system, and the development of a dominant learning style for Arab students. It must be stressed again that this is not a value judgement, but a recognition of DIFFERENCE. EFL teachers must recognize and respect that difference and attempt to meet it in a constructive manner.

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PROCESSES WHICH CONTRIBUTE DIRECTLY TO LEARNING

CLARIFICATION/VERIFICATION
The learner asks for examples of how to use a word or expression, asks for the correct form to use, etc.

MONITORING
The learner corrects his or her own or other's pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, style, or usage with respect to appropriateness for the setting.

MEMORIZATION
The learner attempts to acquire words or other language elements through associations designed to assist storage and retrieval.

GUESSING/INDUCTIVE INFERENCING
The learner uses hunches derived from clues to guess meaning or to guess general rules, as in using clues from the surrounding language context or from an item's repeated use in different contexts.

DEDUCTIVE REASONING
The learner looks for and uses general rule, such as looking for rules of co-occurrence or applying grammatical rules.

PRACTICE
The learner experiments with new sounds, uses a mirror for practice, drills self on words in different forms, makes use of new words in speaking, etc.

PROCESSES WHICH CONTRIBUTE INDIRECTLY TO LEARNING

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRACTICE
The learner creates situations with native speakers to practice, spends extra time in the language lab, etc.

PRODUCTION TRICKS
The learner uses communication strategies, such as circumlocution, a synonym, a cognate, gestures, or speaking more slowly.

(Rubin, 1981 in O'Malley et al, 1985)

SOME GENERAL TRAITS OF FIELD DEPENDENCE & INDEPENDENCE

FIELD DEPENDENT

Interpersonal orientation:

Physical and emotional

Selective attention to social cues

Sociable

Interested in people

Knows and is known by many people

Considerate

Warm

Tactful

Makes others feel comfortable

Good at achieving conflict resolution

Spectator approach to concept attainment

FIELD INDEPENDENT

Interpersonal orientation:

Relatively insensitive

Idividualistic

Aloof

Conderned with ideas and principles rather than people

Demanding

Inconsiderate

Less willing or able to accommodate to others' point of view

Hypothesis testing approach